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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LUSAKA 000481

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TAGS: PGOV ZA

SUBJECT: DEFENSE MINISTER TAKES OFFENSE AND RESIGNS FROM OFFICE

REF: A. LUSAKA 405
B. LUSAKA 471

Classified By: Ambassador Donald Booth for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. On July 7, Zambian Minister of Defense George Mpombo publicly announced his resignation from his cabinet position. The Movement for Multi-party Democracy (MMD) parliamentarian also announced that he would step down from his position as energy chair on the MMD's National Executive Committee (NEC). In his public statements, Mpombo criticized the NEC for its efforts to exclude other MMD hopefuls from seeking the MMD nomination for the 2011 presidential election and encouraged others to run against President Banda. Although the development is not likely to result in instability or unrest, it further weakens President Banda's fragile political base within his party. According to some sources, Mpombo's views are shared by many within the MMD party. Although he is not a political heavy-weight, his actions could serve to strengthen the newly allied opposition parties if MMD leadership does not respond adequately. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Tensions heightened within the ruling MMD following Mpombo's resignation announcement on July 7. Although he attributed his resignation decision to personal reasons and a desire to focus more intently on environmental issues (namely the deforestation of his constituency in the Copperbelt), Mpombo subsequently told journalists that he did not approve of the recent NEC decision to present President Banda as the sole MMD presidential candidate in the 2011 elections (Ref B). Mpombo added that the NEC should allow others to contest the nomination in the projected 2010 MMD party convention. MMD insiders suggest that the development is a manifestation of the ill will that has lingered between Mpombo and President Banda ever since Mpombo asserted himself as acting President immediately following news of former President Mwanawasa's incapacitation (based on written authorization that he had received prior to Mwanawasa's departure for the AU Summit in Egypt). Vice President Banda, who had been attending a funeral in Zimbabwe, returned to Zambia immediately and commandeered the presidential mantle from Mpombo. (When Mpombo subsequently made claims to be the acting Vice President, he was at once refuted by then Government Spokesperson Mike Mulongoti.)

¶3. (C) Mpombo's resignation is not likely to contribute to political instability or domestic unrest. Neither are there any indications that military officers or rank and file military personnel will consider Mpombo's departure from government as a cue for insubordination or insurrection. On numerous occasions, the Army Chief of Staff has publicly stated that the military is committed to maintaining the rule of law in Zambia, and by all accounts appears prepared to continue abiding by that policy. According to Ministry of Transport Permanent Secretary Dominic Sichinga, who was with President Banda when the story broke, the announcement caught the president entirely off guard. The development poses a dilemma to the President, however, who must decide whether or not to expel Mpombo from the MMD party -- a move that would

necessitate a parliamentary by-election within ninety days in a province that emerged in 2006 as an opposition stronghold.
(Note: Mpombo's constituency, Kafulafuta, however, was one of the few regions within the Copperbelt that did not side with Patriotic Front leader Michael Sata in the 2006 and 2008 elections; nevertheless Sata's popularity in Kafulafuta may have increased in 2009 as a result of rising unemployment.
End Note.)

¶4. (C) In his press conference, Mpombo also announced that he would exit politics in 2011: "I won't be around. This is the process of encouraging young people to come forward to learn the ropes of politics." According to Embassy sources, however, including senior MMD member Sebastian Kopulande, Mpombo continues to harbor political ambitions. Kopulande added that many within the party share Mpombo's frustrations, although they have chosen to work for change from within. Other MMD sources suggest that Mpombo may align himself with MMD aspirants such as former Finance Minister Magande Ng'andu or former First Lady Maureen Mwanawasa. If expelled from MMD, however, Mpombo might change political parties altogether, thereby strengthening the newly established opposition alliance (Ref A) between the Patriotic Front and the United Party for National Development (UPND). President Banda will have to weigh this danger against the cost of allowing Mpombo to preserve his MMD membership, something that might undercut the president's efforts to consolidate power within his party.

¶5. (C) A credible contact within the MMD suggested that Mpombo's announcement conveniently coincides (and cleverly preempts) an alleged GRZ corruption investigation of his

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involvement in a shady 2003 oil procurement deal as then Minister of Energy. According to this line of reasoning, if/when the corruption scandal goes public, Mpombo will be able to claim that the GRZ is lashing out at him in political retaliation for his political insubordination. In the event that there is some truth to these rumors, it may be near impossible to ascertain either the validity of the purported investigation or the veracity of Mpombo's potential counter-claim given the seemingly increasing propensity (of the government and civil society alike) to use the anti-corruption campaign as but another front of a broader political confrontation.

¶6. (C) Comment: Mpombo, who lost as many parliamentary elections as he had won between 1978 - 2006 and who was dismissed as energy minister in 2003 following a national fuel shortage, cannot boast a large following. Still, Mpombo's current degree of influence is disproportionate to his political support base, given President Banda's siege mentality in the face of recent corruption scandals, slowing economic growth, and national strikes. The MMD's best choice may be to resist the urge to retaliate and to let Mpombo slip quietly off the headlines. Meanwhile, the NEC might consider and publicly invite others to contest the party nomination in the spirit of political pluralism that formed the basis for MMD's establishment almost twenty years ago, lest Mpombo's resignation herald increased disarray and disenchantment within MMD's ranks.

BOOTH